

A  
L E T T E R

TO THE

REV. JAMES IBBETSON, D. D.

[Price 1s. 6d.]

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LETTER

TO THE

REV. JAMES IBBETSON, D.D.

OCCASIONED BY

A THIRD EDITION OF HIS PLEA, FOR THE  
SUBSCRIPTION OF THE CLERGY TO THE  
XXXIX ARTICLES OF RELIGION;

IN WHICH

THE PRESENT SCHEME OF PETITIONING THE  
PARLIAMENT FOR RELIEF IN THE  
MATTER OF SUBSCRIPTION IS  
OCCASIONALLY DEFENDED.

---

BY A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

*The Revd Mr. Fox-Strachan.*

---

—Constare debet, quid sit pax Ecclesiæ, ne eo nomine qualis-  
cunque torpor, aut quies obtrudatur.—

Obedientia quam Ecclesiæ antistitibus præstamus, ita laudabilis  
est, si ex præscripto Christi et Apostolorum exhibetur.—

SECKENDORF.

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L O N D O N:

Printed for S. BLADON in Pater-noster Row.

1771.



48  
4 8.  
900.

~~DR. SMITH'S TREATISE ON HUMAN~~

~~THEORY OF POLITICAL GOVERNMENT.~~

~~WITH A HISTORY OF THE CONSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT,~~

~~IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.~~

~~BY DR. SMITH, M. A. PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL~~

~~SCIENCE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.~~

~~WITH BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES, AND AN APPENDIX,~~

**A** **L E T T E R, &c.**

REVEREND SIR,

THE tract you have now republished, and as you \* tell us at the request of your friends, must appear to you and to them, of considerable moment.

The request of your friends is grounded upon the public appearance of a paper, containing proposals for an appli-

\* See a manuscript advertisement prefixed to what the Doctor is pleased to call, a 3d edition of his Plea,—the Doctor will excuse the liberty I have taken in *supposing*, those who requested him to print upon this occasion, were friends.

B

cation

cation to parliament, for relief in the matter of *subscription*,—they must consider your performance therefore as a probable means of retarding, or even ruining the intended scheme of reformation—and as you have adopted their idea by printing, you cannot be surprised at this notice of so important a book.

And yet, Sir, an unlucky observation of your own had well nigh deprived me of the pleasure that has arisen from your work.

I happened to open your pamphlet at the 11th page,—where you smartly observe, “that a preface is commonly “the fort of writers wherein they “mount the choicest of their artillery.” I immediately turned to your preface. Will you, Sir, abide by your idea of the strength of prefaces? Shall that be a test, by which to try your present work? argument in a preface is frequently impertinent—and you have declined

declined it; wit is sometimes aimed at, and you have affected it.

Do these flashes of merriment burst upon you frequently? if so, I pray you restrain them—at least upon important subjects—lest they always mislead you, as in the present case.

For if, as you insultingly tell us, we have † already met with many misfortunes in our expedition—and if at last our ship be run ashore, and our armament reduced to a state of *inefficiency*, then this exertion of yourself and your friends is impertinent and cruel. 'Tis coming like a savage from his cave to murder the wretches whom the wreck has stranded.

I have mentioned, Sir, the pleasure that has arisen to me from your work. You are generous in not adopting the *secret and smothering plan*—you bring the matter into debate—and this is exactly

† Page viii. of Preface.

what we wish for. The pleasure I feel upon this occasion, would indeed have been more complete, had your performance contained any thing which called for an acute and learned answerer. But as it does not, you might have escaped thro' this defect—had not the silence of contempt been sometimes mistaken for the modesty of conviction.—Whatever ideas of convenience might have induced the first protestant churches to deviate from their own principles, into those of their adversary, by establishing confessions of faith—all such ideas must be brought into the present debate, about the *right* and *utility* of subscriptions, very improperly—or brought merely as *apologies* for the conduct of the reformers, not as *justifications* of it.

If their enemies slandered them by the imputation of impious, and extravagant opinions—the proper answer would have been, an appeal to the conduct of their lives, and a solemn declaration, that they admitted of no standard of opinion but the sacred scriptures. For when their confessions

confessions were published, the scandal still continued, and the articles contained in them were still condemned, as impious and extravagant. So that they weakened the protestant party by dividing it—they gave the Romanist an opportunity of attacking them upon their own principles—and this, without avoiding the abuse, which offended orthodoxy is ever ready to discharge.

But whether the first reformers were right or wrong is nothing to the present question about subscriptions. Granting them to have acted wisely in publishing their opinions for reputation's sake—yet the question concerning their *right* to establish these opinions, upon the oath or subscription of those whom they admitted as preachers of religion, still remains—and even giving up this—we may further question the propriety of making the doctrines of men, just emerged from ignorance, the standard of belief to the present clergy.

For the dispute about *subscription* contains two different questions. 1st, Can

*any*

any subscription to *human* articles of religious belief—be defended? 2d, Can subscription to those of the church of England be justified? Many who would not hesitate to answer in the negative to the second, would yet, perhaps, be scrupulous about the first, although 'tis impossible to discuss the second without establishing the true and negative answer to the first. For while there is manifest or apparent error, we should proceed to correct it — and error, manifest or apparent, there will be in every set of propositions, which are neither demonstrative, nor inspired. If it be said, that such an acknowledgment of the impossibility of avoiding error, is a good apology for not revising the present articles—I answer no;—for every step towards truth makes the next much easier—and this particular step would convince the people of what thousands are scarce aware of—that articles and liturgies are mere human compositions, which may and ought to be improved—this would induce them to transfer their zeal from them to the Bible which will then be  
read

read as a fixed standard by which to correct any successive improvement, until we come to inspired truth expressed in scripture language.

Indeed the certainty that all human systematical explications of scripture doctrine *may* be wrong—is so far from an apology for our continuance in the present forms, that it is an unanswerable reason against it. For if they *may* be wrong, why make *them* the tests of our orthodoxy—while the plain words of scripture are at hand, which we know *must* be right.

The expediency of subscribing in *literal* senses has been so fully considered by the author of the *confessional*—that I am loth to lose any time in reflections upon Bp. Burnet, whose ideas upon the subject you choose to adopt.

It may be observed, however, that † Burnet himself informs us, that he was only to consider what is the im-

† Introduction to his book on the articles.

" portance of the subscription required  
 " among us ; and not what might rea-  
 " sonably be wished that it should be."

He took the matter as he found it, and though he honestly rejects the notion of the articles, being articles of peace only, makes them so in fact, by helping every man to put his own sense upon them.

But we, upon a different plan from Burnet's—would have men arrive at *what might reasonably be expected* to be the state of a Protestant church—and will not condescend to flatter the exertions of absolute power by finding *ways and means* to make men easy under them.

It is as evident as rational argument can make it, that if Archbishop Laud, or Bishop Burnet, or Archdeacon Ibbetson has fixed upon the § *true principle of maintaining the subscriptions of the clergy*, the articles are no longer *articles* for

§ Plea, p. 2.

*avoiding*

*avoiding diversities of opinions, and for  
the establishing consent touching true re-  
ligion—but things of so flimsy a tex-  
ture as to be bent this way by you,  
and that way by another, to the total  
confusion of the church.*

But, Sir, I take my leave of Bishop Burnet, whom I am sorry to find in such company—to follow you in your attempts to relieve the clergy from their perplexity, by establishing that general principle, upon which alone you confess, the right and expediency of subscription can be supported. This general principle is the convenient one of literal senses—by which, it is supposed, that *different* men have a right to subscribe the *same* article in *different*, or even *oppo-*  
*site* senses—by giving the words any meaning they may be made to bear, without considering their sense as fixed by the original compilers. You do very well, Sir, after this to assert your regard for protestant liberty—though to retort a charge of your

C                      own,

own, this looks much more like the liberty of the regular clerks of Ignatius].

Your first attempt is to vindicate the laws and constitution which require the clergy to subscribe the articles of religion, against the charge of injustice§. And how, Sir, do you perform this?—not by any argument—but by referring us to the professions of some of the most eminent among our clergy, who have talked much of the moderation of the church of England.

Suppose the church of England to be the most moderate, and tolerant, and purest in the world—what follows? not that she has no defect—not that there is no injustice in her constitution, which should be removed—but a very different proposition, that she has less than her neighbours;—which conclusion carries us beyond the present question. Private Doctors may harangue

¶ Plea, p. 15. § Plea, p. 3.

upon

upon the difference between the church of England and that of Rome—but what is their language to the language of the church? She has determined her sense—that sense is at present established by law; and the man who opposes it, does it at no trifling risque. She indeed disclaims infallibility all the while—but mockery seldom makes oppression lighter. You attempt the distinction between the churches with singular ill success. You contrast impositions made by the church of Rome upon pain of anathemas and curses—with what? not with impositions made by the church of England upon penalties as grievous—nay the very same—but with the private sense of her doctors, who forsooth have always expressed themselves with great caution and diffidence in this matter.† Pray, Sir, who entitled these generous spirits to so much moderation? Did they learn it from certain of our canons—or from the damnable clauses of the Athanasian Creed?

† Plea, p. 5.

But you yourself seem to be aware that all the moderate concessions made by unauthorized men are not of any moment without the sanction of the church —since you immediately profess yourself dissatisfied with the faith and sincerity of those who explain their subscriptions into a general acquiescence—a public profession only, or a tacit persuasion.\* And yet what must these *moderate* men do? The distinction between ours and the hated church, with regard to the spirit with which she imposes her doctrines, must be kept up—and yet it cannot without this *general* acquiescence, or some equivalent evasion. For if *every tittle* must be received, it matters not by what name that authority is called which enjoins it—and if every tittle is not to be received, where is the line drawn—and how is the distinction to be reconciled to the constitutions of our church?

\* Plea, p. 5.

Stillingfleet,

Stillingfleet you confess was unable to draw the line. According to the different views he had of the subject—he contradicted himself. And this will ever be the case with those, who, in defence of our present system, are to oppose themselves both to papists and protestant dissenters.

If the catholic be pressing upon the topic of infallible authority, as exerted by the church of England in her articles—no, says the English champion—our church requires nothing to be subscribed but what is agreeable to sacred scripture—and conscious of fallibility, leaves several points at large with a view of including men of different sentiments.

But if the dispute must be managed with a dissenting protestant—who will seize this very declaration, and turn it to his own advantage in the combat; then, all on a sudden, the church is for  
an

an *absolute* subscription as a term of ministerial *conformity*.

The case of Chillingworth, as produced by you, is a very extraordinary one—He confesses, you \* tell us, “ that “ the constant doctrine of the church “ of England is so pure and orthodox, “ that whoever believes it, and lives “ according to it, shall undoubtedly be “ saved—and that there is no error in “ it which may necessitate or *warrant* “ any man to disturb the peace, or “ renounce the communion of it.”

And yet he refused to subscribe—because, you inform us, he was persuaded that those who subscribe are supposed and required to subscribe the *truth* of the articles; and he refused to subscribe because he scrupled *one or two* propositions.

Now, Sir, where is the *moderation* you have brought this great man to witness

\* Plea, p. 6.

for,

for, when it is evident that he thought *every* proposition contained in the articles must be believed by a subscriber?

His subscription afterwards to those very articles, upon being appointed to the office of Chancellor of Sarum, must be resolved, either into the weakness of human nature, or into a conviction happily produced in his mind, that the propositions he once doubted of were true. That the great Chillingworth was ensnared by preferment, I will not suppose, though considering you as his friend, you have produced a most unlucky instance of his honesty,—the latter supposition must then be true; and what, after all this parade of *authorities*, will you make of it? Only this, that Chillingworth in *his* day believed all the articles,—which, in the present debate, is proving just nothing.

It seems, Sir, that you who are speaking peace to the embarrassed minds of *many of the Clergy*, think *authority* more likely to succeed than *argument*; and therefore

therefore you have held up to them some high and venerable names under which you wish them to recline in the utmost indolence of security. I trust however that they will never abuse the names of protestants so grossly as to make them subservient to the purposes of absolute and unnatural authority.

Something like argument must be produced before we can give up the assertion that the restraining condition which is laid upon the candidates for holy orders, is cruel and inequitable. *You assure us* indeed that the difficulty of reconciling one's self to the article of uniformity will be shewn not to be so great as has been represented. I believe, Sir, the difficulty varies in different men, and, supposing the quantity of moral honesty to be equal in each, is in direct proportion to the quantity of scripture knowledge which each man possesses. But you are going to argue, and by the rule of public utility\*—Still public utility! Is this topic so very im-

\* Plea, p. 8.

portant

portant in your view, as to take the lead of every other consideration? It has been justly said, that “ Jesus never intended his religion should be shut up in ‘ a national church,’ and you leave this assertion unrefuted, as not affecting the main argument.\* But, Sir, it does affect the main argument and very deeply too.

For as the terms of the Christian communion are clearly settled in the gospel, as they are such as distinguished the Christian from the Jewish and every other religion, as a religion of *liberty*, and an *universal* religion—it follows that no *plea* of general utility can justify men in changing, perplexing, or otherwise expressing the terms of communion with a view to *conformity*, or any other *human* design.—The authority of *man* however dignified, cannot extend so far. Let the authority of the magistrate be

\* Plea, p. 8.

exerted in establishing *Christianity*—let the practice of *it* be encouraged—and the preachers of *it* supported by *law*—and all good men will bless and defend such an establishment.

But, Sir, the reasonings of a Christian upon cases of *conscience* are not to be bounded by views of mere *utility*, whether private or public. The question is, what is right—what wrong? This you have evaded. The right once discovered is to be pursued through all its consequences.

And yet, if we mean any thing when we talk of the providence of God, we may rest satisfied that no *truth* can ever be prejudicial to the *true interests* of men. The public good can be promoted by nothing so effectually as by the practice of religion—there can be nothing more friendly to the practice of religion, than a thorough acquaintance with its evidences and designs—but such an acquaintance

tance will never become general in any country where the teachers of religion are themselves deterred from their religious enquiries, by a set of *human* articles already subscribed by them as true — and which they cannot differ from without danger and high inconvenience.

The argument you have adopted, which, from the idea of general utility, aims at proving the necessity of the *present* standard of doctrine, is an affront to the church whose champion you have stood forth. It resembles the church of England to a ruinous pile, one stone of which cannot be touched for the sake of a repair without having the whole about your ears.

But why, Sir, should you, a member of the church of England, suppose her so very destitute of argument in favour

of her doctrines—as to believe her ruin sealed, if subscription be removed? The man who accepts of episcopal ordination, who gives a solemn assent to Gospel truths expressed in Gospel words, and promises to preach nothing but what he finds revealed in scripture—can never hurt the church of England while she is worth the saving. If we believe her doctrines to be true, we must believe that free enquiry will confirm them. But if they be false—though supported by laws and defended by armies, they will fall before advancing truth—and the sooner such an event takes place the better.

We are no enthusiasts—we do not wish the destruction of episcopal government—we are ministers of the church of England who reverence our superiors—who feel the blessings of a free country—who have exerted our understandings—and want the redress only of what

what appears upon solemn argument to be grievous.

You talk<sup>†</sup> of the *religious* rights of mankind being diminished for the *public good*, of which you are so fond—and that they may be diminished you consider as a proposition generally acknowledged. By whom acknowledged? I know certain countries, the climate of which seems admirably adapted to your constitution, where the civil establishment is of such a nature as to be inconsistent with the spirit of gospel liberty, which must be kept under at any rate.

However, there are no duties to be learned from the freest investigation of Christianity which can possibly clash with the safety or happiness of a government founded upon reason and justice.

<sup>†</sup> Plea, p. 8.

But

But how come the *religious* rights of mankind to be diminished at any time? By no contract of their own, because they cannot give them up. The rights of humanity with which a man is born are capable of such diminution by a *contract* which ensures him an *equivalent*. For this world is the scene of *their* exertion. But *religious* rights respect a *future* state—nor can we receive an equivalent for parting with them. I consent to relinquish my native right of punishing a thief—and safety in society, by means of a legal appeal is the condition. But if I part with my gospel right of deciding for myself in religious cases—what equivalent can *man* propose? All his exertions are confined to *this* world, but my risque is in a *future* one.

I could wish to see you in the attitude of definition. What is it you mean by the *religious* rights of men? Man, considered

dered as a religious being, has, I presume, a right to form his own religious opinions upon what he reads in the scripture, and to act agreeably to them—and if such an exertion of right should clash with any *human* constitution, there would be reason to suspect that constitution to be defective.

Indeed it is possible that opinions prejudicial to the best of governments may be formed in a wrong head, from reading the Bible, or any other book. But this, from the very nature of things, can happen but to few—and when those few carry their opinions into *practice*, let the magistrate interfere, and take away their power of doing harm.

No man complains because a madman is confined in Bedlam. But as God is the author of the human mind as well as of the Gospel—as he has worked the love of truth into our constitution—I repeat it—events of this melancholy kind

kind can happen but seldom—and have chiefly happened to men restrained from the free use of reason—or fired by the resentments of some leader whom oppression has made mad—and not to the free and manly enquirers after truth.

Do you believe, Sir, that the furious anabaptists who disgraced the reformation in Germany—were the natural production of liberty?

Were they not produced rather by ignorance let loose?—Would they have existed, had men been left free to read and practice the lessons of scripture-virtue unpolluted by the tyranny of man?

Your notion of curtailing the religious rights of men for the sake of general good, is founded upon the supposed impossibility of opening the terms of communion sufficiently to take in christians of very different opinions concerning matters of importance.† But

† Plea, p. 9.

where

where has the experiment been so fairly tried as to give you a right to say it is impossible? This I know that the terms of communion recorded in the gospel, are sufficiently large to take in christians differing upon very important points.

Let it be observed, however, that the present virtuous attempt of the clergy is not a scheme of comprehension meant to oblige dissenters from the established church — 'tis a *protestant* design — connected with no party—to which we are roused by what we know and what we feel.

The separation of the protestant dissenters from our church, is properly a separation of *robes* and government—not of *doctrines*. To the robes and government we have no objection—but if they have, the removal of subscription is no advance toward them.

You kindly allow us the use of our liberty when we are urged to believe, or

E

profess

profess points of doctrine which are contrary to the rule of faith, and to the law of God. Now suppose I could shew this to be the precise case of the clergy—yet what would the use of our liberty amount to? A man can never be properly said to be allowed the use of his liberty, when that use will prove a grievous injury to him. His state after the exertion of his liberty should be as eligible as it was before—because by using his liberty he has fulfilled a duty.

The man, or the body of men, who oppose me in a legal action, are guilty of violence—but I am opposed if embarrassments and hardships are laid in the way of my duty. We shall be tolerated indeed, you tell us, and that we can claim no more—that is, when the exertion of our liberty has brought disgrace and poverty on our heads—we shall not be persecuted beyond starving for conscience sake.

Such

Such \* *toleration*, you assure us, presupposes the establishment of a national church—in truth it does; so does every sort of tyranny *presuppose*, but not *justify*, a tyrant. The word *toleration*, being the language of a superior, supposes one—but the *thing* worth contending for does not. For we contend for the equality of christians, as such—and oppose that measure as unjust, which excludes any man from the advantages of the society he lives in, by the means of *human tests* of belief.

It has been justly observed by the great author of the † Confessional—that the weak answers which have been given to the important remonstrances of serious and judicious men, on the article of a farther reformation, and the supercilious contempt with which the most respectful, as well as the most reasonable of them have been passed by, must detract something from the estimation of those

\* Plea, p. II.    † Preface to the 1st edition.

whom the thinking part of mankind will suppose chiefly concerned to take notice of them.

He thinks it will look like a combination to adhere to the established system for some *political* purposes not fit to be owned, while no solicitude is perceived to relieve the reasonable scruples of conscientious men, within or without the church.

The contempt with which you treat these observations, and the argument by which you attempt to discredit them—have no other effect than to add *you* to the list of these weak answerers, and supercilious contemners, of whom that generous writer complains.

Can you seriously believe that you have defended the church of England against the objections of our author?

Upon turning over your third page, I began to expect some *argument* in defence

fence of literal subscription—but there I was disappointed—and †here just as you mention the insinuation of *political* purposes as not detracting from the estimation of the clergy, you yourself put a *political* apology for their conduct into their mouths.—

You tell them that they may boast—  
of what? not of having acted simply and  
fairly by changing that part of their  
conduct which has been blamed—or by  
giving a rational defence of it—but “of  
“ being constitutional conformists to  
“ the ecclesiastical establishment sup-  
“ ported by the public authority of the  
“ state, and by a great number of learned  
“ and eminent men, &c.” What is all  
this to the purpose? we say that sub-  
scription to human formularies of  
belief is wrong—wrong, when tried  
by reason and scripture. You say it is  
right—right because supported by hu-  
man authority.

† Plea, p. II.

It

Is it enough for an honest man's conscience that he is supported by *authority*? surely neither the law of opinion nor of the land, should avail to quiet a mind, doubting concerning matters of great moral import—especially when a legal way of obtaining redress is open.

But let us come to what is acknowledged to be the fundamental position, upon which the authority of established confessions in protestant communions depends.

" Every particular church considered  
 " as a society, has a right, as other so-  
 " cieties have, to secure its own peace  
 " and welfare by all lawful means,—  
 " and consequently, to prescribe such  
 " terms of communion as appear to be  
 " most expedient for that purpose—  
 " provided that nothing be required  
 " under this pretence, which is con-  
 " trary to the word of God, or incon-  
 " sistent with the liberty of other  
 " churches."

"churches†." The reasoning by which this position has been fully and repeatedly overthrown, tends to shew that the same way of arguing for self defence will justify the church of *Portugal* in her cruelties, and tends to carry every religious establishment into arbitrary and illegal attempts upon the liberties of men. This reasoning you treat as sophistical—because you † tell us the use of *lawful* means in one church cannot conclude for the use of *unlawful* ones in another. But who is to judge between these lawful and unlawful means? Every establishment will determine for itself, and then what becomes of the distinction?

In one sense, every thing that is established by law, may be called lawful. But if reference be made to the eternal law of reason—or to the exemplifications of it in the gospel scheme of freedom, no-

† Plea, p. 12. quoted from the Confessional.

† Plea, p. 23.

thing can be called *lawful*, which lays religious beings under the temptation of violating their consciences—or any way abridges that liberty which they received from the highest authority. God has fixed the terms of salvation—he has fixed them in certain words—*whoever admits these terms becomes a Christian, and is entitled to communion.*

But as *salvation* is compatible with diversities of opinion even upon important subjects, no church can be defended in airy schemes of *uniformity*—which it is impossible to produce—and which God has not required.

The saving clause by which it is acknowledged in the position produced above—that nothing should be required by any church for the sake of self-defence, which is contrary to the word of God, has been fully shewn to be of no avail by the § judicious author

of the *Confessional*—his consequence therefore stands good, viz.—that the same way of arguing from self-defence will justify the church of Portugal—and the position from which it is fairly deduced still carries the brand of falsehood. For the *arguments*, or the *assertions* rather, which you make use of against our author's reasoning, are fallacious. You tell us, that upon the principles of our establishment no violence can be justly practised against any man on account of his religion *as such*. This bold assertion is supported by a quibble. The old trick of giving the heretic into the magistrate's hand is here of admirable use to you—it exculpates the church at once, who, poor lady! will weep all the while for the suffering his obstinacy may bring upon his head. He does not suffer for his religion *as religion* forsooth, when he is deprived, starved, excommunicate—but he suffers as a

<sup>†</sup> Plea, p. 13.

composed

F

naughty

naughty citizen, who has dared to affront the magistrate by disobliging the church.

You should first have proved the magistrate's right of establishing one set of *human* opinions to the exclusion of all the rest, before you introduced him thus, gallantly to take up the quarrel.

But though you oppose the reasoning of the *Confessional*, which brings the church of England into a comparison with that of Portugal—yet you run directly into the same—not from design, I believe, but from necessity.

You assert the right of the church of England to the magistrate's protection, if her opponents either *make* or threaten to make any disturbances against the establishment—and allow the use of violence in that case, which, as *necessary*,

§ Plea, p. 14.

becomes

becomes *lawful*. Now, Sir, go on with this logic to its conclusion, and then I, and every other clergyman of the church of England, who *wish*, and will *act* for the abolition of subscription to unscriptural propositions, and by this means may disturb the establishment, ought instantly to be consigned to the wholesome discipline of *suspension*, *deprivation*, *fine*, *imprisonment*, and even *burning* according to the different proportions of our *obstinacy*. So that your *prudential methods* and *schemes of self-defence* are only soft words for cruel meanings, which discover themselves instantly as the church is attacked in her rights by law established.

But happily for us, Sir, we are under no *high commission court*, composed of spirits like yours—our cause will come before a mild and free government, which will give the matter all serious and just attention.

You go on to tell us †, that in contradiction to the ill use that has sometimes been made of the principle of self-defence and self-preservation in matters of religion—the church of England for herself, and for that great community which goes under the denomination of the reformed church, of which she has deservedly been honoured with the title of chief and leading branch—declares instruction, exhortation, and admonition to be the only legitimate means of advancing and preserving the true religion of Christ. This is a part of your description of the church of England—I shall go through the whole presently.

If you *will* bring the inquisition to my mind, I cannot help it.

I must tell you, Sir, that this taken in connection with what went before

† Plea, p. 15.

is the language of a son of Dominic. The church declares for *instruction*—very well—and she acts as every person would do who loves his ease—for severe correction is attended with some pain and trouble at all times. But what if these emollients are not found sufficient? O, then a different treatment becomes *necessary* and so *lawful*. The church however must keep up her character, and as the magistrate cannot be wrong in granting his protection in such a case—he must be called upon. The church has done her part in the manner of a *church*, by admonition—and he must perform his in the manner of a magistrate—by what? the sword to be sure. So that you have here given us a true inquisitorial process. I am plainly in the right says the church to the poor delinquent—I pray you I exhort you to listen and obey—'tis not *my* nature to be cruel—but if you persist in opposing me, I have a passionate *brother*, who will certainly think me ill-used, and knock your brains out.

I go

I go on with your description. " She  
 " professes higher views than to esta-  
 " blish herself in peace and quiet upon  
 " the earth by engaging mankind in an  
 " outward acknowledgment of Chris-  
 " tianity by means of temporal rewards  
 " and punishments—she uses no vio-  
 " lence to compel men to conformity  
 " —she allows all the theories of chris-  
 " tian liberty to stand upon their own  
 " foundations, and deprives no man of  
 " his natural right to judge for himself  
 " and to practise accordingly§." As  
 this is mere *declamation*, 'tis very fine.  
 But as it was meant to satisfy the minds  
 of thinking men in their present situa-  
 tion, it should have contained something  
 like *argument*.

With what degree of truth can it be asserted that no violence is used to bring the conscience to compliance, when conscience is broken in to the work of subscription before it can be supposed our

§ Plea, p. 16.

affent

assent is rational? imagine some generous youth to refuse his university-subscription—would his degree be conferred? would not his progress in life be barred? would he not offend—would he not grievously distress his friends? you perhaps may look with indifference upon such a situation, and coolly answer—that he knew the conditions of his admission, and should not complain—or, in other words, let the university be forsaken of her *conscientious* members rather than an act of authority which cannot be defended, should be done away.

You go on, Sir,—“ She has condemned to alledge in her own defence the usage of protestant churches abroad, and has the early practice of established confessions at home to appeal to, long before the tyrannical spirit of Rome prevailed—yet these being human compositions she acknowledges them to be subject to the examination of every intelligent

"telligent Christian with the scriptures before him."

The power of *sound* upon the human mind is wonderful. Precedents, precedents! what do they mean? a thousand years ago some predecessor of mine did thus and thus—and I his descendant, robbed of my right to judge, must copy the venerable example. In the art of war—in the practice of physic—in our government these precedents would make an admirable figure. But all *these* things concern mankind—they fix attention and are improved—but religion we trust to the care of heaven—we have been told that 'tis divine and shall not be prevailed against by the strength of its adversaries—and men have seemed resolved to pay heaven the compliment of not taking its defence out of good hands.

But does the church of England indeed acknowledge, that all established confessions being human compositions, are

are liable to the examination of every christian? Yes, she acknowledges it—but not with a view of deriving information to *herself*, which one might expect from a *protestant* society—for in that case she would candidly listen to every advertisement of her errors, whereas she now declares every man to be excommunicate who holds her in the wrong.

But let us hear a little more. “ All this is very consistent with the authority which she claims nevertheless of interpreting the scriptures for all her members; who being persons of sound judgment, and knowing their obligations to comply with, or dissent from the establishment, did, in the instant of determining for themselves, in voluntarily subscribing or receiving her established confession, exclude themselves from the right of private judgment, and submit to the authority of the church; not as an infallible authority,

" authority, but as an authority of  
" order."

Tell me you, who disclaim all connection with the clerks of Ignatius, what is the difference between an authority *infallible* and *orderly* in the present case? You leave no room for change of opinion in the church, because *private judgment* is to be given up in the moment of subscription.

You attempt indeed to soften the matter by supposing the subscriber to be of sound judgment. But are we to look for this sound judgment at the common age of a bachelor of arts, or that of a deacon? Can a common man —can a prodigy of parts at that time be capable of judging the multiplicity of propositions he sets his name to? You will not say it. What then? why, as you immediately go on to observe,  
" if it happens that any who have sub-  
" scribed the articles of religion, do  
" find in the progress of their studies,  
" that

" that what they assented to is inconsistent with their farther discoveries  
 " and improvements in theology, there  
 " is no room to retract; such a change  
 " of opinions is virtually disclaiming  
 " their subscription, which admitted  
 " them into their function and preferences;  
 " the security which has been  
 " given to the public of the soundness  
 " of their faith and doctrines, and that  
 " they will instruct the people committed  
 " to their charge agreeably thereto, in the truth of the gospel,  
 " has the nature of an obligation, which  
 " stands in full force against them for  
 " the due performance of the conditions;  
 " and if these are no longer complied with, I know no other alternative,  
 " than to give up the emoluments which they enjoy under  
 " them."

If there were not something in our nature which rebelled against the notion of giving up the right of private judgment in the moment of subscribing

the articles, there could be no risque of our departing from their sense. But as all christians, subscribers or not, are bound by the law of Christ to search the scriptures, a change of sentiment may, and most probably will arise—but upon protestant principles I cannot follow you into your consequence. For such a conduct on the part of all *improvers* in theology, would give the church a power at least equivalent to that of infallibility. She is the standard of scripture-truth—dissent from any of her opinions and quit her, and you leave a firm body of orthodox and ignorant men, who never can be changed in opinion, never improved; so that the last trump will sound to the sons of such a church, clouded in the divinity of the 16th century. Besides, your argument for quitting the church upon improving into a difference of opinion from her, puts her articles above the scripture.

I sub-

I subscribe them as guides by which to proceed in teaching the people *gospel truth*—but finding these gospel truths to clash with my human guide—what am I to do? You say, I must cease to preach the gospel in that church and quit her—I should have thought it more rational still to preach the gospel as a means of amending my human guide. Upon your principles St. Paul himself might be forced to relinquish his ministry in the church of England.

But one might suppose, from the placid manner in which you talk of quitting preferments, and departing from the ministry, that this might be done without incurring any legal penalty—whereas you must know that *excommunication* is the declared punishment of such a step. So that if a man once engage in the ministry, and improve into a difference from the church, he must either go on preaching against his conscience, or suffer all she is able to inflict.

If

If it be said, that the church would overlook such a departure in a conscientious minister—this is nothing to the purpose—we are considering her as she is, with the powers she *may* exert—we are enquiring how far her present state may be improved, and as you rise against such improvement, you are involved in any consequences arising from arguments founded upon the present establishment.

Luckily, however, you \* tell us, that the church claims no legislative authority in all this matter, but in alliance and concurrence with the state. So that if the state be backward to execute, we may all be safe with our petition.

But what is it to me, Sir, whether the Church does an unjust thing alone, or with an accomplice ?

\* Plea, p. 18.

Subscription

Subscription to a large variety of human articles is in itself wrong—and though the splendor of that *alliance* which the Church has formed, may dazzle the eyes of *some* men, it remains to be seen, whether it has misled the judgment of the majority. However, since the state has given all their present strength to the decisions of the Church, we proceed rightly in petitioning the parliament for relief—and you are impertinent in your attempt to interrupt us—because, you grant the magistrate may choose his religion; and you cannot possibly determine whether a generous and improved British legislature will think it just to bind the doctrines of the 16th century, upon the consciences of the present clergy.

Every individual has a right to choose his religion—and to determine with whom he will hold communion. The use that has been made of this proposition is curious.

Pray

Pray, Sir, do you never read upon the subject you have undertaken to write upon? In the year 1771, you give us what you call a *third edition* of a book, which very third edition is marked with the year 1768—and as if nothing had been said since *that* period, which affected your argument, you do not condescend, though your title page talks of *additions*, to take the least notice of a certain masterly pamphlet, in which this very argument from the right of individuals has been fully shewn to be sophistical and § inconclusive. Every individual has a right to choose his religion, but not to press it upon another by any other means than that of *argument*. You have advertised a *fourth edition* of your Plea—let us not be insulted by dull repetition of exploded

<sup>§ See a free and candid disquisition on religious establishments, &c. occasioned by a visitation sermon preached at Chelmsford, May 22, 1770. Printed for B. White.</sup>

sophisms—

sophisms—deign to take some notice of the *free and candid disquisitor*, who bears so hard upon this favourite argument:—when you *reason* we will respond; for truth is the object of our enquiry.

In the mean time, you should not indulge yourself in the common strain of adulation toward the church, for not presuming to ratify her own <sup>†</sup> decrees. For if the authority which enjoins them be of such a nature as will admit of no alteration in the present system—if every subscribing member of the church, is bound to give up his private judgment—if every difference of opinion from the standard doctrines, though produced by the study of the scriptures, is an obligation upon the man who differs, to quit the church—if even an attempt to move the legislature be thought by

<sup>†</sup> Plea, p. 18.

you to deserve opposition—then where is the *effectual* difference between Rome and London as to the article of infallibility?

True indeed it is that the multifarious doctrines of a church when established by law, have no more truth than they possessed before—and I thank you for the concession, because, if there be any meaning in your distinction between *infallible* and *orderly* authority, it is the duty of the church to suffer these doctrines to be examined—to acknowledge the improvements of the world by adopting them—and not to encourage you in furnishing little apologies of *acquiescence* for the minds of Christians, which should be taught to value *truth* above every human consideration. But no—“ it § becometh a good and “ peaceable member of the commu-“ nity, to wave or give up his religi-

§ Plea, p. 20.

ous,

"ous as well as his civil rights, to a  
"legal authority."

What does this mean? we were just told, that subjects were not obliged by church doctrines, established by law, unless they came under the same persuasions; and then follows the above, extraordinary passage, introduced with a *yet*—“ yet it becometh a good and peaceable member of the community to wave, or give up his religious as well as his civil rights to a legal authority.”

This would be uniformity indeed! if men, though not under the same persuasions, were, for the sake of being called peaceable members of the community, to wave their religious right of judging for themselves, and unite with the church. Your exception in favor of the dissenters from the establishment, is only one, among the many instances of words used without ideas.

For if it become *every* good and peaceable member of the community to give up his religious rights to legal authority, then, *they* in not giving them up, cease to be good and peaceable members, and 'tis the duty of the magistrate to fall upon them as peace-breakers.

But I am weary of these popish consequences they rise so fast upon me.

The expediency of a national church, being granted, you think *subscription* a necessary consequence; and upon this you ground your ‡ *Plea*.

But I would ask, whether a national church did not exist among us before *subscription* was enjoined? Your || declamation in favour of the magistrate's interposition may be suffered to pass

‡ *Plea*, p. 20.    || *Plea*, p. 21.

for

for argument, and yet your plea for subscription be over-ruled. For the magistrate has in fact taken sufficient security of his ministers as to their uniformity by means of the severe penalties which are now in force, and which oblige them to the punctual use of all the forms prescribed in the church.

*Subscription*, after this assurance taken, is the grievance—subscription *ex animo* to a large collection of *human* propositions, by which the consciences of men are wantonly sported with, and which *has* not been, *cannot* be shewn to advance the good of society in any view.

Nor will this grievance of subscription be lightened in an honest man's estimation by any examples of *political* men, however dignified; who refine but will not reform; and who unnaturally strive to engage the powers of the head, to combat

combat against the feelings of the heart.

Those among our modern subscribers who have grown shy of that sense which the original compilers stamped upon their articles, are apt to question the possibility of coming at their sentiments; although there be no period of history during which it is more evident what men thought; provided words and actions be considered as interpreters of the mind.

The 9th article of our church explains the doctrine of *original sin*. Perhaps if it were taken in a *literal* and independent sense a good natured man might evade the consequence it seems to warrant, *viz.*—that infants dying unbaptized are damned. But let a fair enquirer compare it with the opinions of the time at which it was drawn up—let him construe it by some expressions in the baptismal office of our church—let him recollect what stress is at present laid upon

upon *home christening*, remembering all the while that midwife-baptism was for a time admitted in our church, and I think he cannot deny the consequence, cruel as it may seem—that infants dying unbaptized are damned.

So that whether King Charles I. or any other King ; at the instance of Laud or any other favourite, attempt by declaration or any other mode, to give latitude to our subscription ; yet while the sense of the articles subscribed is so easily collected, there can be no peace for an intelligent and conscientious minister, who will feel his mind hurt, his religious liberty abridged, and will endeavour for redress by every legal method.

Political exigencies which have betrayed Kings into prevarication and meanness, are vile *pleas* in a Christian's mouth for submission to these *tricks* of interpretation, which destroy that very uniformity for which you seem to be so anxious. You have dexterity,

Sir,

Sir, and you may be well rewarded for it. Yet there is a sort of juggl<sup>e</sup>, which though it make us stare while the exhibition lasts, upon reflection, produces contempt of the juggler—contempt of him as a *man*, who has misapplied the gifts of God. Turn over the noxious volumes which the *clerks* of *Ignatius* have given to mankind, and in return for which we give them our detestation — turn them over and tell me from which of them you learned that men may differ in their subscriptions from each other, without a difference from the church. Your words are worth transcribing—“ Most probably, there are still Calvinistical and Arminian divines of the church of England; and a more numerous tribe of other denominations; who though all men of the same confession, do not perhaps agree exactly in opinion with regard to many of the 39 articles of religion. Yet they all subscribe to them *without any diversity of opinions*; that is, in the

"the sense of varying from the articles; not of differing from each other." Two men differ upon the article of holy the Trinity—one adopts the Arian, the other the Athanasian sense—each thinks that article is for him, yet each shall preach a different doctrine from the other—how then is there *still a consent touching true religion?* or, do you understand *true religion* to mean the doctrine of the church, though that doctrine be not yet explained? Or do you mean any thing by the word *church*? This last question is put, Sir, because it seems probable, that the licentious subscription for which you plead, if carried into practice must instantly subvert the established church. The present establishment is made in favour of a set of men, faithful as to the 39 articles and the propositions contained in the liturgy and their subscription in general. Now, if we depart from the *original sense* of these propositions—if indeed as you

assure us, “ † it is plainly impossible that  
“ any thing should be delivered in such  
“ clear and certain words as to be abso-  
“ lutely incapable of some other sense”—  
then within the *nominal* church of Eng-  
land are contained numerous religious  
societies, the *largest* of which upon the  
principles of alliance should be esta-  
blished, and the tenets which it hap-  
pens to hold published by authority so  
as to supersede the old and useless sett.  
I say the tenets which it *happens* to  
hold—for as you take away all fixed-  
ness of opinion, by allowing a variety  
of different senses to the articles, and  
thus ground your church upon the  
*present* opinions of those who compose it,  
its sentiments to day may be changed  
to-morrow, and we may be amused  
with a new church of England, at least  
once a year. But a difficulty of a more  
dreadful appearance now starts up—  
since the *nominal* or *ostensible* church

† Plea, p. 35.

of England is divided by your plea for subscription into a variety of smaller societies there will be danger, lest some body of *dissenters* should out-number the largest of those societies; in which case the magistrate is bound by self-interest to unite with that body as the most capable of carrying on his work.

As an historian, Sir, I shall give you but little trouble.

I leave you in able hands—when you have *indeed* answered the confessional, you will be far beyond my reach.

One thing I could however wish to have explained.

You tell us that at the Restoration, great importunities were used with the King, that the liturgy might be revived; and such alterations made therein, and additions thereto, as were requisite for the ease of tender consciences; and you

I 2 immediately

immediately add, *all this was done* †. I protest that I am at a loss to understand you. I thought it evident that the high church party with *Clarendon* at their head, being afraid of the dissenting interest, had done every thing to keep them out of the church and state. I thought your friend *Burnet* had confessed something like this. Perhaps you had in view, when you talked of *all this being done*, the vile breach of the King's word given at Breda—or the famous corporation act—or the solemn mockery at the Savoy—or the sham plots—or, perhaps you refer to the alterations of the liturgy, agreed upon in convocation in 1661. But what said *Tenison*, what said *Burnet*—what says common protestant sense to them? They were trifling and inadequate, and in their end, cruel and oppressive; inasmuch as they caused

† Plea, p. 28.

the act of uniformity to pass with less opposition, which act was grievous to conscience, because exclusive of the heavy penalties for breach of uniformity, it obliged men to give their unfeigned assent in the most solemn manner to a vast variety of human propositions, which it was impossible that many of them should see, within the time limited for subscription.

But I hasten to the conclusion of your argument.

You think there is an ambiguity in the expressions of our present tests, and your inference from that supposition is that every man may put his own sense upon them.

I should rather have thought, from the idea of a test, that when it became ambiguous, the authority which first imposed should explain it: or if that authority did not choose to interfere, that an honest man was obliged to get rid

rid of the ambiguity by going back to the writings of the persons and times by whom, and when, these tests were produced. This, supposing the necessity and justice of such tests, would be natural and right—but when this necessity and justice have been repeatedly disproved, the proper step would be a repeal. For just so far as any prescript is ambiguous or unintelligible it ceases to be a test of uniform belief; unless perhaps in this single proposition, the church must be in the right; and though I do not understand, yet I will subscribe her dogmata, because whenever she shall descend to explain herself more fully I know she will be right.

So that the state of *inefficiency* to which you endeavour to reduce subscription by your plea for different senses, grounded upon a supposed ambiguity of expression, instead of superseding the necessity of abolishing subscription, clearly points it out. Especially if we consider that there could only be diversities

sities of sentiments after all, and these without perpetual quarrels among men pretending to *orthodoxy*, and odious revilings of each other on the score of insincerity in subscription.— If the zeal and vigilance both of pastors and people in the church of England against popery be visibly declined —if religion be indeed debased to a trade and a project to advance mens interested and ambitious views, as you assure us —then reason justifies the inference exactly opposite to yours, and calls loudly for a review of the present system.

Nothing surely can more effectually ruin the plans of popery than to call men back to the principles of the reformation — to set them free from the imposition of man's authority in sacred matters — to teach them to consider all things as fallible but the word of God — and to set *that* up as a test by which to try and alter the sentiments of men.

*to the end of convincing  
himself*

To

To mention grievous errors committed under any scheme of action, as a reason for continuing in that scheme, would make one smile if the subject were not so important.

Men like to take the chance of a change at least, especially when there is a strong probability from reason that the plan they have been pursuing is a bad one. Now whenever christianity is debased into a state engine, and is considered, as *you* have considered it, merely in the view of public *utility*—whenever men have their interests opposed to their convictions, as will happen where human tests are to be subscribed—whenever free enquiry is discouraged, and many important things done as it is called, *in course—that*, Sir, is the time to look for such abuses as you mention—*then* it is that religion becomes a trade. Just in proportion as men follow your advice, and sacrifice their religious privileges to one set of human

human opinions, they will be ignorant of the generous and extensive scheme of christianity ;— its sanctions will strike them less forcibly as they less discern its truth—their worldly interest will avail more as it is more attended to, and the clergyman will sink into the man of the world.

But why, Sir, have you dared to insinuate, that the reasons which induce men to adopt the scheme of further reformation, are not fit to be owned ?† There is nothing upon the face of such a scheme that can justify suspicion—it has no immediate connection with our worldly interest—it may rather injure than advance us, by calling down the hatred of Ignorance, and the vengeance of Superstition on our heads. Do not, by that sort of artifice against which every generous spirit must rise with indignation, attempt to bring us under the public

† Plea, p. 38.

odium. Why are the dissenters shuffled into the question ? We are no dissenters.—Why then, in a debate concerning *clerical subscription*, and the propriety of a scheme to remove it, have you so unfairly addressed yourself to the *prejudices* of men ? If you are indeed affrighted, and even at your wit's end—I sincerely pity you, and to hush your fears will tell you and all the world, that the present union against *subscription* is directed to that one point only—that the rational spirits now cemented for that purpose throughout the nation, mean not to object to the liturgy or any part of it—they will apply for relief to that authority which alone can give it, to that authority which imposed subscription—and they will apply in the most dutiful manner.—They wish to be freed from the *unnecessary* burthen upon the conscience, of *subscribing* to the truth of all those human propositions which the law obliges them to use ; and the man who understands what *protestantism* is, will see, that a petition of such a sort will come with as much propriety from

one

one who believes all that he subscribes,  
as from one who has his doubts.

It is a little strange that you who have all along been accommodating subscription to *every man's* opinion, should be alarmed on account of anti-trinitarians of any sort, whom the removal of subscription might let into the church. A stranger to the subject might suppose that the doctors of the church of England were uniform in their opinions of the trinity—or, which would be more absurd, that subscription upon your plan was of force enough to keep any man out.

But you would terrify men from the work of reformation, by alarming them with the noise of danger from the people. This is the old cry—the church is in danger! But 'tis too late—these words have been disenchanted by the rapid improvements which have been made since the day of *Sacheverel*.

If indeed the people were so ignorant as not to distinguish between the ruin of the church and the pulling down of an antient buttress, which, though meant to *strengthen* only, destroys the beauty of the building—if they see no difference between the destruction of *subscription* to human, systematical articles, and the destruction of Christianity, whose is the fault? They should be better instructed.

But this is invidious all. The people, upon a plain representation of the case, have common sense enough to understand its propriety. Indeed it does not properly concern them, since the law has made sufficient provision for the uniformity of their ministers. A new translation of the bible would alarm them infinitely more—yet this would be a paltry reason against so necessary a step.

Let

Let us then wave the mean consideration of mere \*utility, and bring the subject before the nation—'tis *duty*, and fear urged against *duty*, is the coward's plea. Cowardice is infamy at all times—but in the man who holds an important trust, 'tis more than infamy. To preach the *truth* is an important trust—we have solemnly engaged to do it.

Let not the fear of man ensnare you, ye preachers of Christianity!—ye know whom ye should fear.

Let not the dread of poverty keep you back! for ye have weighed this world in the balance of truth.—

\* Utility—For the utility of subscription, see a very ingenious pamphlet, entitled, *Thoughts on our articles, with regard to their supposed utility to the state.* Sold by White, &c.

See likewise, part the 3d of the truly ingenious Dr. Dawson's “Answer to letters concerning established ‘confessions of faith, &c.’” Sold by Newbery, &c.

A philosophical indolence in the enjoyment of truth, however beautiful it may look in antient description, can never satisfy a Christian's mind. We must publish on the house top what has been whispered into our ears.

We see a strange indifference to the concerns of religion among men. Where lies the fault? Religion in itself is not a thing to be contemplated with indifference.

Why are minds so attached to civil freedom, so indifferent about religious liberty? is this natural?

Our station in society is an important one. The fairest opportunity is now offered us of doing extensive good. The opposition that has hitherto been made is trifling—the danger of embarking imaginary—the success probable—

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the virtue of the attempt certain—and  
the pleasure which it will give, never  
to be taken away from us.

F I N I S.

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Engraved copper plate by J. C. St. Omer  
from a drawing by J. S. Copley



